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C O N F I D E N T I A L PANAMA 001828

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [VE](#) [PM](#)  
SUBJECT: PANAMA: "WHAT'S NEXT?" IN VENEZUELA

Classified By: Ambassador William A. Eaton. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

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What's Next for Chavez?  
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¶1. (C) "What's next in Venezuela," First VP and FM Samuel Lewis asked Ambassador on December 3. Stunned by the "No" victory in Venezuela, Lewis commented, "Everybody is holding their breath to see what Chavez does next." Lewis mused that Chavez would need to change the subject and grab a new issue to rebound from his loss at the ballot box. That issue could be returning to his efforts to free kidnapped victims from the FARC. "The issue played favorably for Chavez; he got proof of life for Ingrid de Betancourt and others," Lewis added.

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What's Next for the Opposition?  
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¶2. (C) Noting that the opposition would have difficulty sustaining its momentum -- "There's no electoral event on the horizon" -- Lewis wondered if the opposition could or would try to return to the recall referendum to end Chavez's term before 2012. MFA Senior Advisor Nils Castro, who accompanied Lewis, noted the important role of students in the "No" campaign and said that he believed a new generation of leaders was emerging. (Note: Castro is sent frequently by Lewis and President Torrijos to Caracas as a private emissary to Chavez and high-ranking GOV leaders.) Lewis noted how quickly older opposition leaders like Antonio Ledezma and Manuel Rosales, who Lewis asserted had been largely absent from the "No" campaign, were to get on the airwaves on the night of the referendum.  
EATON